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Gang Involvement Among San Diego County Arrestees in 2012

December 2013

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A SANDAG CJ BULLETIN

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GANG INVOLVEMENT AMONG SAN DIEGO COUNTY ARRESTEES IN 2012

Project Overview

The nexus between gangs and crime is commonly accepted and well documented in the research. While crime has been on a downward slide until recently, gang activity and membership have remained an ongoing concern for many jurisdictions across the country. According to the 2011 National Gang Threat Assessment published by the National Gang Intelligence Center, gangs are responsible for almost half of violent crime in most jurisdictions and up to 90 percent in several others. In addition, gangs are continuing to play a large role in drug distribution and trafficking; partnering with one another to establish stronger criminal networks for profit; becoming more involved in alien smuggling, human trafficking, and prostitution; and utilizing new and advanced technology to facilitate criminal activity to a greater degree than ever before (National Gang Intelligence Center, 2012).

In addition to the immeasurable personal costs associated with this relationship between gangs and crime, attempts to address the issue are costly, with the nation spending more than \$5.6 billion each year on gang suppression, correction, and prevention. These costs are felt in San Diego, with reports from law enforcement that gang members are migrating from the Midwest to take advantage of the lucrative drug trafficking opportunities in the southwestern jurisdictions (National Gang Intelligence Center, 2012). The southwest border of the United States is the primary entryway for illegal drugs and the staging area for their distribution throughout the country.

San Diego County is home to 158 different gangs consisting of around 7,500 currently documented gang members (San Diego Police Department personal communication, 2013). This total number of gangs includes the increased presence of Somali gangs, the ongoing presence of the Mexican Mafia (a well-established prison gang known for its violence and meth trafficking), and

Bulletin Highlights

Involvement Starts Young:

Association with gang members started on average at 13.5 years of age and the number one reason for joining a gang was because their friends were members or associates.

It Is Familial: Almost two-thirds (61%) of arrestees with a gang affiliation reported that other family members were in a gang.

Most Will Leave The Gang The majority (69%) of arrestees currently involved in gangs reported that they thought their involvement eventually would end.

Criminal Activity Increases Once Joining a Gang: Nearly three-quarters (71%) of arrestees reported increased criminal activity after joining the gang.

Guns Are Common: More than half (53%) of adult and 31 percent of juvenile gang-affiliated arrestees reported having carried a gun and most (66%) reported it was either very easy or easy to obtain.

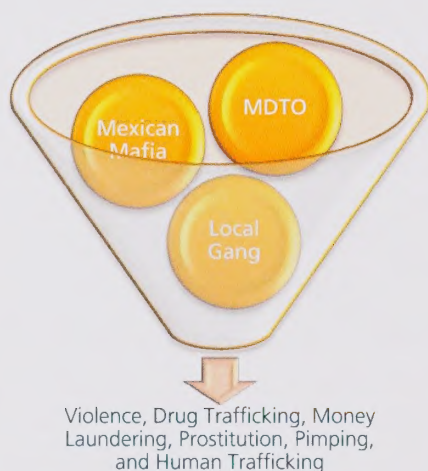
Many Have Substance Use and Criminal History Issues: Both adult and juvenile arrestees with gang affiliations were more likely to have more extensive justice system contact and substance use histories than those who did not report an affiliation.

Connection to The Border: Around one quarter (25%) of adult arrestees with a gang affiliation reported they have been asked to transport drugs across the border, compared to 12 percent with no affiliation.

the workings of the Mexican Drug Trafficking Organizations (MDTOs). The latter two are known to work together, extorting local gangs to support their trafficking operations. Specifically, while the Mexican Mafia has about 200 members, it extends its reach into San Diego communities by requiring local gangs to pay “taxes” to the Mafia and carry out its criminal activity (San Diego Police Department communication, 2011).

FIGURE 1

LOCAL GANGS LINKED TO HIGH LEVEL OF ORGANIZED CRIME



Because of this connection between crime and gangs, and the amount of local resources directed at addressing gang activity, SANDAG expanded its annual bulletins to take a closer look at the characteristics of gangs in the region.

This SANDAG CJ Bulletin is part of a series highlighting findings from data collected as part of the Substance Abuse Monitoring (SAM) program. As part of this project, adult and juvenile arrestees are approached within 48 hours of their arrest (and booking) to participate in an interview regarding their drug use and other recent

behaviors. Beginning in 2008, arrestees who reported any gang affiliation,¹ either in the past (if within five years for adults) or currently, were asked to complete an addendum regarding their involvement with the gang, including how it started, how it related to involvement in illegal activity, and any desire they had to leave the gang. This research bulletin presents this information, including analyses by arrestee age (adult or juvenile sample) and gender.

How Many Arrestees Report Having a Gang Affiliation?

During 2012, 567 adult males, 282 adult females, 95 juvenile males, and 25 juvenile females were interviewed as part of the SAM program and provided a valid urine sample for analysis. Of these individuals, 25 percent of adult males, 19 percent of adult females, 36 percent of juvenile males, and 40 percent of juvenile females reported having ever affiliated with a gang (not shown).

For the 44 juveniles with any self-reported affiliation (34 males and 10 females), 43 (98%) completed a gang addendum. For adults, only those who reported any affiliation within the past five years (52%) were asked to complete the gang addendum. Of these 100 adults, 93 (93%) completed an addendum (65 males and 28 females) (not shown).

¹ A specific definition of gang affiliation was not given to arrestees, allowing the individuals being interviewed to decide for themselves how they should be categorized. However, interviewers were instructed to include individuals who identified themselves as “skinheads” or “taggers.”

Factors Related to Leaving Gangs

With most gang-affiliated individuals eventually leaving gangs in their lifetime, it is critical to understand the factors related to desistance when creating strategies and programs to reduce gang involvement and increase success for those wanting to reenter the community (Pyrooz & Decker, 2011; Young & Gonzalez, 2013).

FACTORS RELATED TO DESISTANCE:

Maturation: Most youth who join a gang will leave it as part of the natural maturation process.

Grow Tired of Lifestyle: The decision to leave the gang is complicated and evolves over time. Growing intolerance of the negative lifestyle pushes individuals to seek a different way of life. These factors include repeat victimization, new family commitment (parenthood), and/or threat of arrest and criminal involvement.

Most Leave Gangs Without Violence: While there are incidents of individuals becoming victims of violence as a result of leaving a gang, the majority of ex-gang members are able to walk away without a violent incident.

STRATEGIES FOR SUPPORTING GANG DESISTANCE:

Recognize When The Individual Is Ready To Leave: Interventions are most effective when provided at the time when the individual is searching for a different lifestyle and is motivated to change.

Remove Barriers To Success: Although an individual wants out, s/he may still be seen by others (e.g., police, friends, rival gangs) as a member. Interventions need to include a plan to help an individual create a new identity and navigate these old impressions.

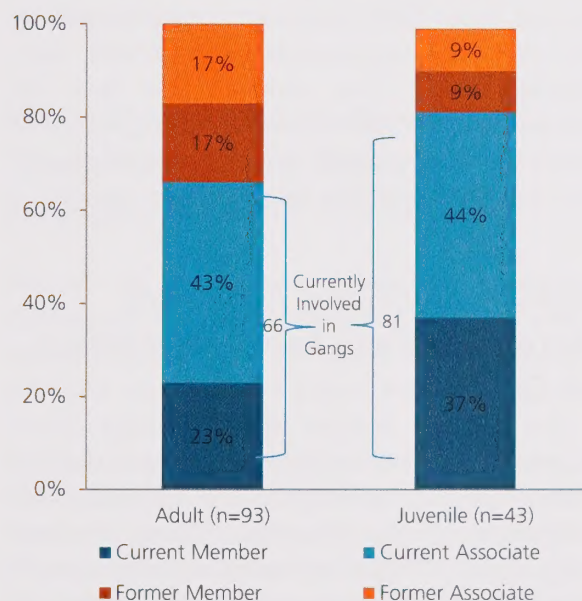
Support Adult Responsibilities: Ex-gang members need support with setting and achieving goals, education, employment, and healing family relations and creating new social supports.

What Is the Nature of the Gang Affiliation for These Arrestees?

At the beginning of the gang addendum, interviewees were asked to describe if they were a current or former member or a current or former associate. As Figure 2 shows, about two-thirds of adults and eight out of ten juveniles reported some type of current involvement, either as a member or associate.

FIGURE 2

BOTH ADULT AND JUVENILE ARRESTEES WHO COMPLETED ADDENDUM WERE MOST LIKELY TO REPORT CURRENT GANG AFFILIATION



NOTES: Cases with missing information not included. Percentages may not equal 100 due to rounding.

SOURCE: SANDAG SAM Program, 2012

When those with no current gang affiliation were asked to explain why they had ended their involvement, 56 percent said they had grown out of it or became tired of it, 31 percent wanted to get out of the justice system, 11 percent cited family intervention, 8 percent said it had become too dangerous, and 6 percent (2 youth) said they left because of financial reasons and their sibling in a gang was not in the home any longer (not shown).

These data are not only similar to past SANDAG gang reports, they also echo research in the field as to why most individuals walk away from gangs.

The prominent reason is the natural maturation process in human development in which individuals become tired of the lifestyle and turn to address more pressing family needs, especially if they become parents. In terms of their gang affiliation being known by the juvenile or adult criminal justice system, more juveniles reported that they had been documented by law enforcement as a gang member (66%) and ever had gang conditions as part of their probation orders (59%) compared to adults (42% and 39%, respectively). In addition, 36 percent of all interviewees said they had ever been under the supervision of the Probation Department's Gang Suppression Unit (GSU), with no difference between adults and juveniles. Among both age groups, males (59%) were significantly more likely to have been documented as members than females (24%) (not shown). This level of involvement by law enforcement is not only important from a public safety perspective, but it provides an opportunity for special interventions.

How Many Gang Affiliated Arrestees Have Family Members in Gangs?

Generational gang involvement has been soundly documented in the literature and this factor was also evident in the responses of those arrestees with a gang affiliation. Almost two-thirds reported that other family members were also in a gang (61%), with 72 percent of these respondents reporting that this involvement was current. Females, more so than males (75% versus 56%), reported that a family member was part of a gang. When asked if these relatives were in the same or a different gang, 51 percent that some were in the same gang, 27 percent that they were all in different gangs, and 22 percent said they were all in the same gang (not shown).

When asked to describe how they were related to these other individuals, the most common response included cousins (58%), followed by sibling (39%), and aunt or uncle (30%) (Table 1).

TABLE 1
ARRESTEES WITH FAMILIAL TIES TO GANGS
MOST LIKELY TO REPORT COUSINS ARE ALSO
IN A GANG

Cousin	58%
Sibling	39%
Aunt/Uncle	30%
Father	25%
Mother	14%
Other	6%
TOTAL	79

NOTES: Percentages based on multiple responses. Cases with missing information not included.

SOURCE: SANDAG SAM Program, 2012

How Did Gang Affiliation Begin for These Individuals?

Researchers agree that the dynamics of gang formation are complex and that youth joining an established gang do so typically in a manner similar to joining more mainstream organizations, with informal association developing for some individuals into formal membership (Howell, 2010). Complicating the draw towards gangs is that gang involvement often starts during the transition years from childhood to adolescence (American Psychological Association, 2002). It is during this time that youth naturally are pulling away from parents, testing limits, and seeking out peers to explore their self-identity. As such, arrestees were asked how old they were when they first became involved with the gang, and if they became a member, how much time passed before they joined. On average, these individuals reported being 13.5 years of age ($SD = 3.7$, range 5 to 35) when the association began and while some formally joined after as little as 5 to 10 days or as long as 10 years, the average was just less than one year ($.94$, $SD = 1.6$) (not shown).

When asked what their motivation was for becoming a gang member or associating with the gang, the most common reason given was that their friends also did (65%), which is consistent with the importance and influence of friends

during adolescence. Similar to their friends, peer involvement/having a sense of belonging was also cited (37%) as a reason to become involved in gangs, as was the fact that their family was involved (37%). About one in ten respondents reported that they were drawn to the gang to make money through drug dealing (12%), to obtain protection (11%), and/or because it gave them a sense of status (11%) (Table 2).

Although only 11 percent stated they joined the gang for protection, when asked further if they felt the gang provided protection once involved, two-thirds (66%) responded that affirmatively, with juveniles more likely to believe this was true (84%) than adults (57%). When these 88 individuals were asked who was offered protection, 68 percent said themselves, 74 percent their neighborhood, and 49 percent their family (not shown).

TABLE 2

**PEERS CITED AS TOP REASON FOR BEGINNING
GANG INVOLVEMENT**

Friends are members/associates	65%
Gives sense of belonging	37%
Family are members/associates	37%
Drug dealing/making money	12%
Provides protection	11%
Provides status	11%
Forced/coerced	4%
Other	9%
TOTAL	133

NOTES: Percentages based on multiple responses. Cases with missing information not included.

SOURCE: SANDAG SAM Program, 2012

When asked what individuals have to do to become a member of the gang, most responded that they had to commit some type of violent or illegal act. The majority of respondents reported being “jumped in” or fighting with someone else in the gang (70%), with others describing initiation as involving fighting someone in another gang (13%), or stealing (6%). Over one-third noted that they had to perform other acts (34%), such as having sex with a member of the gang, “putting in work” for the gang, or they just felt pressure from living in the neighborhood that was the gang’s turf. Respondents also noted committing other illegal acts other than stealing (10%), most of which involved shooting or killing someone (6 of the 10), or theft (4 of 10) (not shown).

What Types of Activities Do These Individuals Report Engaging in With the Gang?

Because of the known association between criminal acts and gang involvement, arrestees who reported some type of current or past gang affiliation were asked whether they engaged in specific legal and illegal activities regularly with their friends/peers in the gang. As Table 3 shows, almost all (95%) said that they hang out, with another 91 percent saying they get high or drunk, 81 percent attend house parties, 77 percent get into fights, and 74 percent reported “cruising.” Approximately half of individuals reported that their gang activity revolved around illegal acts including graffiti/tagging, theft, robbery, stealing cars, and vandalism. Approaching significance were the proportion of juveniles to report graffiti/tagging compared to adults (70% versus 52%) (not shown). Interestingly, a very small proportion (15%) answered affirmatively when asked if they communicated with or about the gang on social networking sites (not shown). This is smaller than the general population and smaller than other studies on gang usage of social networking (Pyrooz & Decker, 2011).

Perceptions from Law Enforcement

To supplement the information shared by gang-affiliated arrestees, 11 local law enforcement agencies were surveyed in November 2013 regarding gangs in their jurisdictions, including their perception of the level of gang involvement in violent and other crimes, what they most need to more effectively address gang-related crime, and whether gangs are posing a more significant risk to their communities now, compared to five years ago.

Gangs Account for More than One-Quarter of Violent Crimes:

The 11 departments were asked to estimate what proportion of violent crime gangs accounted for in their jurisdiction. The average estimate was 26 percent, with 6 of the 11 estimating less than 25 percent, 4 between 25 and 50 percent, and 1 over 75 percent.

Drug Distribution Topped List of Gang Crime Concerns:

When asked to rate how concerned they were about the role that gangs play in different types of crimes in their jurisdiction (on a 5-point scale), drug distribution topped the list (with 9 out of the 11 giving a rating of "4" or "5," indicating greatest concern), followed by robbery (8 jurisdictions), pimping and prostitution (7), theft (5), human trafficking (5), graffiti (4), and motor vehicle theft (3).

Gang Interventions Vary by Needs of Jurisdiction:

When asked to describe what their jurisdiction needed to more effectively address gang issues, responses indicated the need for comprehensive strategies. Specifically, three jurisdictions each noted the need for more prevention efforts and pro-active analysis and enforcement, and two each the need for more officers, outreach and education to parents and the community, and consistent cross-jurisdictional collaboration.

Gangs Pose a Greater Threat than 5 years ago:

Nine of the eleven jurisdictions felt that gangs pose a more significant risk than they did five years ago. When asked to explain why, answers tied back to public safety realignment and the perception that the hammer of incarceration was not as strong as it once was; that gangs are becoming more sophisticated, violent, and are collaborating with one another to a greater degree; and that they are spreading out geographically and diversifying into new types of crimes to a degree not previously seen.

TABLE 3

GANG-INVOLVED ARRESTEES REPORT PARTICIPATING IN BOTH CRIMINAL AND NON-CRIMINAL ACTIVITIES

Hang out	95%
Get high/drunken	91%
House parties	81%
Getting in fights	77%
Cruise	74%
Graffiti/Tagging	58%
Theft	56%
Robbery	56%
Motor vehicle theft	47%
Vandalism	54%
Pimp or Prostitute	21%
Other	3%
TOTAL	129

NOTES: Percentages based on multiple responses. Cases with missing information not included.

SOURCE: SANDAG SAM Program, 2012

What Social Factors Do These Individuals Perceive as Being Related to Gang Affiliation?

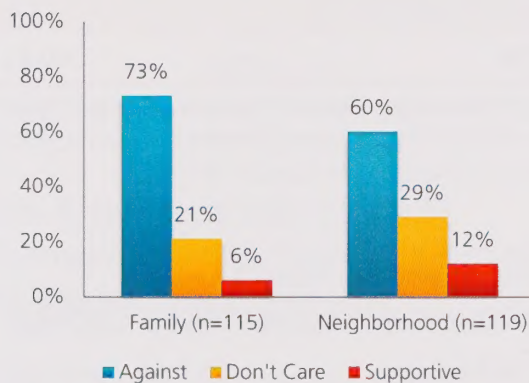
When asked how their families and neighbors felt about gang involvement, nearly three-quarters (73%) said their family was against (either "very" or "somewhat") their involvement and 60 percent said their neighbors also felt negatively towards it (Figure 3). More males reported their families were against it (79%) compared to females (58%) (not shown). In addition, 21 percent reported that their family did not care about their gang involvement, a challenge that may be of interest to those involved in gang intervention efforts. The fact that 40 percent said that others they live near "did not care" or "were in favor" of gang involvement to some degree is of interest because research examining risk factors for gang membership has found that neighborhood characteristics may exert influence indirectly

through overall disorganization, lack of resources, and the inhibition of prosocial bonds (Howell & Egley, 2005).

In addition to asking interviewees to describe their neighbors' opinions of gangs, respondents also are asked how important it is for youth in their neighborhood to be a member of gang. One-quarter (25%) said gang membership was "very important" or "important," while others felt it was "somewhat important" (30%), and most noted that it was "not important" (45%) (Figure 4).

FIGURE 3

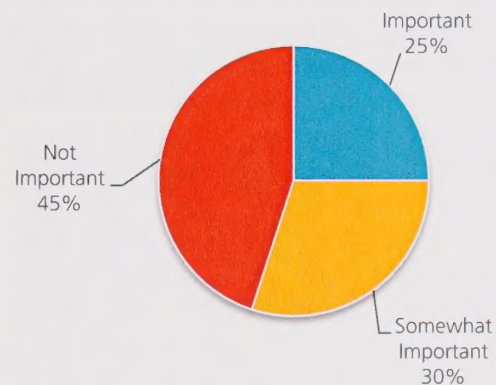
MOST GANG-AFFILIATED ARRESTEES SAY FAMILIES CARE ABOUT GANG INVOLVEMENT BUT NEIGHBORHOOD DOES NOT CARE



NOTES: Percentages may not equal 100 due to rounding. Cases with missing information not included.
SOURCE: SANDAG SAM Program, 2012

FIGURE 4

THE MAJORITY OF ARRESTEES PERCEIVED GANG MEMBERSHIP IS IMPORTANT FOR YOUTH IN THEIR NEIGHBORHOOD



TOTAL = 122

NOTE: Cases with missing information not included.

SOURCE: SANDAG SAM Program, 2012

How Involved Are Gang Members in Illegal Activity Before and After Membership Begins?

According to leading researchers in the field, such as Maxson and Klein (2006), youth who join gangs commit more crime than those who do not join, and gang members also commit a variety of different illegal acts (i.e., they are generalists rather than specialists). As such, gang members were asked if they had committed illegal acts prior to joining the gang, as well as if they had begun to commit illegal acts, or if the frequency of these acts had increased after they joined the gang.² The information provided by the arrestees supports this common finding in the research. Just over half (52%) of the respondents reported that they had not engaged in illegal activity prior to joining a gang. In addition, 31 percent answered affirmatively to both questions – they committed illegal acts before joining the gang and the

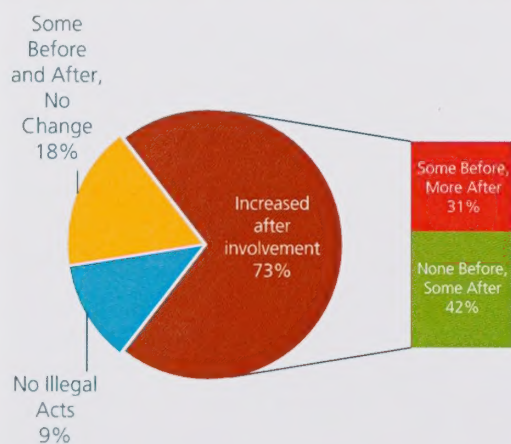
² This only includes those arrestees who reported to be a member of a gang as opposed to hanging out with a gang.

frequency of these acts increased after joining, and 42percent said they did not engage in illegal activity before but they did after joining a gang. In addition, 18 percent said they committed illegal acts both before and after joining with no change in frequency, and 9 percent said they had not committed illegal acts prior to or after gang membership (Figure 5).

Respondents were asked whether they either began or increased the frequency of committing illegal acts after joining a gang. As Table 4 shows, for the 41 individuals who said they either began or increased illegal activity, most said they engaged in fights (93%); got drunk and/or high (70%); stole (58%); did graffiti/tagging (55%); and/or committed vandalism (50%). When all of the gang members were asked with whom they most often committed these illegal acts (after becoming a gang member), 51 percent said they did so with fellow gang members, 33 percent alone, and 16 percent with non-gang individuals. Juveniles more so than adults reported committing crimes with other gang members (75% versus 35%) and adults often acted alone (45%) compared to juveniles (15%) (not shown).

FIGURE 5

MOST GANG MEMBERS REPORT INCREASED CRIME ACTIVITY AFTER JOINING A GANG



TOTAL = 58

SOURCE: SANDAG SAM Program, 2012

TABLE 4

ILLEGAL ACTIONS BEGAN OR INCREASED AFTER GANG MEMBERSHIP

	Percent Began/Increased
Fights	93%
Getting drunk/high	70%
Theft	58%
Graffiti/tagging	55%
Vandalism	50%
Dealing drugs	46%
Robbery	40%
Motor vehicle theft	30%
Pimping/Prostitution	5%
TOTAL	40-41

NOTES: Percentages based on multiple responses. Cases with missing information not included.

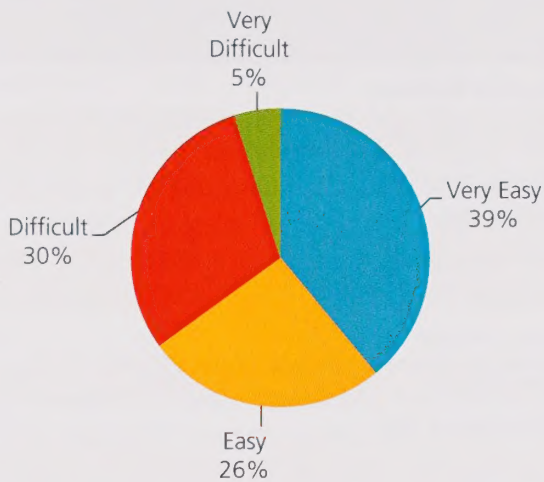
SOURCE: SANDAG SAM Program, 2012

How Many of These Gang-Affiliated Arrestees Have Carried a Gun?

Previous research has shown that gang members are more likely than other similarly aged offenders to carry guns (Lizotte, Krohn, Howell, Tobin, & Howard, 2000). Overall, less than half (46%) of the gang-affiliated arrestees interviewed reported that they had previously carried a gun, with adults (53% versus 31% of juveniles) significantly more likely to do so (not shown). When asked how they had obtained the gun, the most frequent response was through a friend or other gang member (52%), followed by that they had bought it from someone off the street (28%), gotten it from a family member (12%), or purchased it from a store (9%). Only adults noted purchasing it from a store. In addition, 5 percent described other ways, which included "finding it" or stealing it from someone (not shown). When individuals who had ever carried a gun were asked how difficult it was to obtain one, 66 percent said it was "very easy" or "easy" combined (Figure 6).

FIGURE 6

MOST GANG-AFFILIATED ARRESTEES WHO HAVE CARRIED A GUN REPORT IT IS EASY OR VERY EASY TO GET ONE



TOTAL = 61

NOTE: Cases with missing information not included.

SOURCE: SANDAG SAM Program, 2012

Do Any Respondents With Current Gang Affiliations Want to Leave This Lifestyle?

According to the research conducted by Thornberry and his colleagues, the majority of gang participation is limited to one year or less, with most gang members ending their affiliation voluntarily at some point in time. For this interview, arrestees who reported current affiliation with a gang were asked if they wanted to end it, and half (50%) said they did. While the majority of these 94 individuals felt that they could leave the gang, about one in five (19%) said that even though they wanted to leave, they felt they could not for a variety of reasons, including fear of reprisals from fellow gang members or other gang members, and that they were tied to the gang through their family. In another question regarding if they ever envisioned the affiliation ending (perhaps not now but eventually), 68 percent of the respondents said yes, which included 37 of the 46 individuals who expressed an interest in leaving now, as well as 27 other individuals (not shown). When asked if they knew of any people or programs in the community that

could assist them in ending this association, 48 percent said they did not, suggesting that there are further opportunities for outreach and education to this population across the region (not shown).

How Do These Individuals Differ From Non-Gang-Affiliated Individuals?

Tables 5 and 6 present comparisons for the adult and juvenile arrestees who did or did not report gang affiliation (regardless if they completed an addendum and when their affiliation ended if it already had). Overall, those arrestees with gang affiliation were more likely to have been involved in the criminal justice system and used drugs. Some significant differences worth noting include:

- Adults with some type of gang affiliation were more likely to have prior arrest histories, including as a juvenile, being on probation, and to have served time in jail and/or prison.
- Juveniles with some type of gang affiliation were more likely to have been on probation, committed vandalism, brought a weapon to school, sold drugs, and pimped.
- Both adults and juveniles with gang affiliation were more likely to have ever used a number of drugs, consistent with research on factors predictive of gang affiliation (Howell, 2010).

TABLE 5

ADULT ARRESTEES REPORTING GANG AFFILIATION DIFFER FROM THOSE WHO DO NOT ON SEVERAL DIMENSIONS*

	Gang Affiliation	No Gang Affiliation
Demographics		
Average age	30.22	35.5
Hispanic	29%	51%
White	28%	47%
Ever homeless	61%	52%
Justice Related		
Ever arrested	89%	79%
Juvenile arrest	56%	28%
Ever felony	70%	56%
Ever prison	37%	24%
Ever jail	82%	71%
Ever probation	85%	73%
Ever pimped	10%	2%
Asked to transport drugs across border	25%	12%
Sold drugs	37%	14%
Transported drugs	23%	10%
Substance Use		
Ever marijuana	95%	83%
Ever meth	76%	49%
Ever heroin	35%	24%
Ever cocaine	56%	43%
Ever crack	39%	24%
Ever prescription drugs illegally	53%	37%
Ever other drugs	72%	50%
Marijuana past 30 days	58%	40%
Meth past 30 days	44%	26%
Test Positive marijuana	48%	35%
Test Positive multiple drugs	35%	21%
TOTAL	171-193	630-656

*Significant at $p < .05$

NOTE: Cases with missing information not included.

SOURCE: SANDAG SAM Program, 2012

TABLE 6

JUVENILE ARRESTEES REPORTING GANG AFFILIATION DIFFER FROM THOSE WHO DO NOT ON SEVERAL DIMENSIONS*

	Gang Affiliation	No Gang Affiliation
Justice Related		
Ever on Probation	91%	67%
Ever committed vandalism	64%	31%
Ever brought a weapon to school	39%	16%
Ever pimped	9%	0%
Sold drugs	48%	26%
Substance Use		
Ever alcohol	100%	84%
Ever marijuana	100%	88%
Ever cocaine	43%	14%
Ever OTC drugs	36%	19%
Ever prescription drugs illegally	48%	27%
Alcohol past 30 days	70%	41%
Cocaine past 30 days	16%	3%
Ecstasy past 30 days	14%	1%
Ever had AOD treatment	48%	22%
TOTAL	44	72-75

*Significant at $p < .05$

NOTE: Cases with missing information not included.

SOURCE: SANDAG SAM Program, 2012

Summary

Because of the nexus between crime, drug use, and gang involvement, SANDAG expanded its CJ Bulletin series that highlights findings from data collected as part of the Substance Abuse Monitoring (SAM) program to include a gang addendum. This voluntary addendum is administered to those arrestees who report either past or current affiliation with a gang. The purpose of the addendum is to capture additional insights that could be useful to local practitioners and policy makers regarding gangs in the San Diego region.

In 2012, 136 (93 adults and 43 juveniles) arrestees completed the gang addendum. The results of these interviews were consistent with much of the research in the field as to what contributes to gang affiliation, what eventually pulls most individuals away, and what type of activities members participate in. Information shared by the arrestees revealed that the most common reason for affiliating with the gang was initially related to peers who were doing so or family who were involved in the gang lifestyle. Gang members reported they first began associating with the gang around the age of 13.5 on average, during a time when youth are normally pulling away from family and toward their peers and seeking to build their own identities. Consistent with this developmental stage in life, most arrestees reported that their motivation for joining or associating with gangs was because their friends were members or to obtain a sense of belonging with peers.

Once in the gang, individuals reported an increased participation in both legal and illegal activities. Around half of respondents reported ever carrying a gun, adults more so than juveniles, with the majority reporting that obtaining a gun was “very easy” or “easy.” Comparisons with arrestees with no reported gang affiliation showed that those with gang involvement were more likely to use drugs and have extensive justice system involvement.

Consistent with prior research, most of those interviewed either reported they had already stopped associating with the gang or anticipated that they would at some point.

While this information should be interpreted by acknowledging obvious limitations (e.g., self-reported nature of the information, including that the nature of the gang relationship was self-defined), it is consistent with other research in the field. It also supports the recommendations coming from the research on desistance regarding when and how to intervene with those individuals choosing to leave the gang lifestyle.



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